

Countering Parasitical Media Cultures: A Foundational Economy Policy Framework

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1 Introduction

There is growing concern that our media ecosystem has become ‘parasitical’ – thriving on extraction and exploitation rather than mutual benefit. In biology, a parasite is an organism that lives on or in a host organism, feeding at the host’s expense and often causing harm. By analogy, many modern media practices and platforms exhibit parasitical characteristics: they **derive value from users and communities without truly enriching them**, and sometimes actively harm the social ‘host’ (for example, by spreading misinformation or eroding trust).

This briefing paper examines the nature of this parasitical phenomenon in media and the consequences of normalising such a culture. It then outlines how a **Foundational Economy** model – emphasising mutualistic, symbiotic relationships – can counter these trends by focusing on intergenerational sustainability, shared understanding, social trust, and regenerative practices. Key principles such as decentralisation and *distributionism* (widespread ownership) are discussed as part of a policy framework to transform the media from an extractive industry into a public service infrastructure. The goal is to present a discussion prompt for policy discussion that reimagines media as a **foundational good**, serving the long-term well-being of society rather than short-term instrumental aims.

2 The Nature of Parasitical Phenomena in Media

Parasitical behaviour in media can be understood through clear examples that mirror biological parasites. Just as biological parasites depend on a host for nutrients and shelter, parasitical media actors depend on users’ content, data, and attention as their ‘nutrients.’ Crucially, parasites tend to harm or burden their hosts. In media, this harm might appear as the spread of harmful misinformation, the invasion of user privacy, or the undermining of genuine creativity and discourse. For instance, *cultural critic Ted Gioia* describes how major digital platforms contribute little original value yet profit immensely by leeching off others’ work. He notes that today’s largest corporations – social media networks and content aggregators – **‘focus on serving up fake culture, leeching off the creativity of real human artists.’** These ‘parasite businesses’ create almost nothing themselves, instead relying on users or external producers for content.

Clear examples abound:

- **Social media platforms: Facebook** generates profit from the content and personal data of its 3 billion users, while producing no content of its own. It *‘relies on users to*

create content ... and then monetises these people and their unpaid labour, exemplifying a parasitic model. Users effectively become the ‘hosts’ providing time, information, and creativity, which Facebook harvests to sell advertising, without equivalent benefit to those users or the wider community.

- **Search and news aggregation: Google** has been likened to a parasite on the news industry. It dominates digital advertising and draws audiences by indexing news stories, *yet does zero journalism itself*. As Gioia observes, Google *‘feeds off the news but never adds to it,’* even as it contributes to the financial ruin of traditional news publishers. In this way, Google reaps enormous benefits (advertising revenue, data) from content it did not create – a textbook parasite strategy.
- **Content streaming and creator platforms: TikTok and Spotify** further illustrate parasitic dynamics. A widely cited case noted a TikTok user who amassed over 700,000 followers and 11 million video views yet earned only **\$1.85** from the platform. Similarly, Spotify’s streaming model funnels most revenue to the platform and a few rights holders, while many musicians receive negligible payouts. The platform thrives financially by *hosting* others’ creative labour (music, videos) and extracting value from it, leaving creators – the hosts – under-compensated.

These examples show how **parasitical media entities free-ride on investments and efforts made by others**. This follows the basic ‘parasite strategy’ in business: let someone else incur the costs of production or innovation, then intercept the value at the point of transaction. Gioia recounts how professional strategists once treated such parasite strategies as merely theoretical exercises – unethical for reputable firms – but notes that in recent years these practices have moved into the mainstream of big business. In short, **what was once confined to pirates and opportunists is now a dominant business model** among media and tech giants.

Importantly, not all media follows this model. Public service broadcasters, community media outlets, and quality journalism organisations aim to provide value *to* their audiences. However, the rise of surveillance capitalism and platform monopolies has amplified parasitic tendencies. Users’ personal data is mined as a raw resource for profit, and *attention itself* is devoured by algorithms that maximise engagement at any cost. In this ‘new consumer economy, you get consumed’ – the consumer becomes the product. The parasitical phenomenon can thus be summarised as **media that consumes its users**, rather than the other way around.

3 Consequences of Normalising Parasitical Cultures

The normalisation of parasitical culture in the media has far-reaching consequences. When extractive, one-sided relationships become the expected norm, several harmful outcomes ensue:

3.1 Erosion of Creative and Informational Value

When parasitical platforms are rewarded more than content creators or journalists, it undermines the incentive to produce quality content. Creative professionals struggle to survive while intermediaries siphon off value. Gioia observes that *'nowadays, parasite businesses are the largest corporations in the world,'* and genuine creators often cannot compete with these extractive models. If left unchecked, this leads to a cultural ecosystem dominated by recycled, low-quality 'fake' content (clickbait, plagiarism, AI-generated spam) because those yield quick monetisable clicks, while original artistry and investigative journalism languish due to lack of reward. In the long term, society faces a *deficit of original, high-quality information* as the hosts (creators, journalists) are drained and discouraged.

3.2 Public Devaluation of Media and Truth

A parasitical media culture breeds public cynicism. People come to believe that **all media is inherently manipulative or mercenary**, existing only to extract money or serve some hidden agenda. One commentator laments that citizens are viewed by powerful interests simply as *'profit centres, nothing more'*. When audiences assume every news story, social post, or broadcast is motivated by click-throughs, political propaganda, or data mining, it degrades the perceived value of factual information and honest communication.

This normalisation of bad faith accelerates what Jordan Peterson and Sam Harris (in their June 2025 podcast) termed an *'epistemic collapse,'* where no source of information is trusted and shared understanding crumbles. In such an environment, **misinformation and conspiracy theories flourish** because the public applies a default scepticism to even legitimate sources.

Ironically, seeing media as uniformly exploitative can lead people to embrace *alternative narratives* that are even more predatory. Media scholars warn that an overly **instrumental view** – seeing media purely as tools of influence – encourages conspiracy thinking and 'inadequate social and political assessments'. In other words, if we assume every piece of media is an

instrument of someone's will (a political plot, a corporate scheme), we risk losing our ability to discern genuine truth from cynical manipulation.

3.3 Loss of Social Trust and Civic Cohesion

Normalised parasitic media dynamics corrode **social trust** on multiple levels. Within communities, people may begin to relate to each other through the divisive lens that exploitative media often amplifies (e.g. outrage-driven algorithms that pit groups against each other to drive engagement). Institutions – from governments to public health agencies – find it harder to communicate because their messages are filtered through a distrustful media environment. Trust in journalism declines when news outlets chase clicks or become ‘captured’ by owners’ interests. In many countries, media capture has meant news organisations are operated *‘not for profit or public service, but as an instrument for the pursuit of other interests’* – whether political power or corporate gain.

Historically, most media were **‘captured’ or instrumentalised** in this way, and the continuation of that pattern in new forms (like partisan disinformation sites or state-sponsored media outlets) keeps societies polarised. When citizens assume the media exist solely to *exercise power over them*, rather than to inform or empower them, the social fabric frays. Civic participation can give way to apathy or extremism, as people either disengage (‘why listen, it’s all propaganda’) or rally only around media that confirms their biases. Thus, a parasitical media culture ultimately undermines the **informed citizenry and social cohesion** that democracy requires.

3.4 Entrenchment of Inequity and Monopolies

Finally, normalising parasitical practices tends to concentrate wealth and power in fewer hands, exacerbating inequality. The platform monopolies and media conglomerates that perfect extraction (of data, content, revenue streams) grow immensely rich, while local media outlets, independent creators, and community voices struggle. This is self-reinforcing: monopolies can use their resources to further entrench their position – for example, buying out potential competitors or lobbying against regulations.

As one analyst noted, *‘monopolies are always extractive and anti-people’*, even if they arose through market success. A **parasitical status quo** encourages viewing media audiences and

even citizens as resources to be mined (for votes, for money), rather than stakeholders to be served. Over time, this can normalise corruption and ‘grift’ across institutions, as was pointed out in public discourse: many institutions ‘*pretend they are still doing what they were created for, but have become façades for grifts*’, trapping people in dishonest, exploitative arrangements. In sum, parasitical culture feeds societal distrust, inequity, and a sense of powerlessness, creating a vicious cycle that is difficult to escape without a fundamental change in mindset and structure.

4 Media as Extractive and Instrumental - An Expectation to Challenge

One particularly damaging consequence of parasitical culture is the widespread **expectation that media are inherently extractive and only serve instrumental aims**. In a healthy society, media (news organisations, educational content, public forums) would be considered vehicles for shared understanding, enlightenment, and community dialogue. Yet today, many people assume that every media message has an ulterior motive – that someone is trying to sell, deceive, or manipulate. This instrumentalist expectation did not arise in a vacuum; it reflects real experiences with advertising saturation, political propaganda, and clickbait economics. But allowing it to become a *dominant paradigm* is dangerous.

When media are viewed *purely as instruments*, every journalistic investigation is suspected to be a hit-job by a rival faction, every public health announcement dismissed as cover for some profit scheme, and even personal communications on social platforms are tinted with distrust (who is trying to influence me?). Scholars have contrasted this **instrumental approach** with an *environmental approach* to media effects. The instrumental approach centres on how actors use media as a tool to achieve effects on an audience, whereas the environmental view considers how media environments shape society over time.

Over-reliance on the instrumental mindset leads to ‘**conspiracy theories and inadequate social and political assessments**’ – essentially, a breakdown in our ability to objectively judge media content because we are preoccupied with *who* is behind it and *why*. Indeed, as noted earlier, political figures across the spectrum often mirror each other in claiming the internet or the press is just a weapon wielded by their enemies. This reciprocal cynicism showcases the trap of an overly instrumental outlook.

From a policy perspective, **media should not be exclusively understood through an extractive/instrumental lens**. If we treat the media only as a means to an end (be it profit or propaganda), we neglect media's role as a *public space* and a *social institution*. The normalisation of extraction obscures the possibility that media could function as a mutual, dialogic process – one that **informs, connects, and serves** communities rather than 'using' them. It is critical to challenge the expectation that media's sole purpose is to take advantage of people. Doing so requires highlighting and strengthening alternative models of media that operate on trust, service, and reciprocity. The next sections detail one such alternative: using the **Foundational Economy model** to reshape media into a mutually beneficial infrastructure, thereby directly countering the extractive/instrumental paradigm.

5 The Foundational Economy Model as a Countermeasure

Turning the media from a parasitic system to a symbiotic one calls for a paradigm shift in how we think about media's purpose and ownership. The **Foundational Economy model** offers a promising foundation for this shift. The Foundational Economy refers to the sector of essential goods and services that underpin everyday life – such as food, housing, utilities, health care, and education. These are services that every citizen relies on, which ideally should be provided in an equitable, sustainable manner. The **Foundational Economy approach** 'focuses on the provision of everyday universal basics' and emphasises that delivering these basics is key to collective well-being. Rather than subject these vital services entirely to profit-driven logic, the Foundational Economy framework argues for **collective provisioning** and stewardship to ensure universal access and long-term sustainability.

Applying this model to the media means treating **information and communication as essential public goods**, akin to other essential services that deserve stability and protection. A 'foundational' media system would prioritise public interest, local accountability, and democratic values to immunise itself against parasitical exploitation. In practice, this means re-engineering media institutions and platforms with a mission to *serve the public as a whole* (much like a utility company serves all households). Key principles from the Foundation Economy can be translated into media policy in the following ways:

5.1 Collective Provisioning of Information

Just as foundational thinking insists that basic services (water, electricity, etc.) should be accessible to all, a foundational media model insists on **universal access to reliable, high-quality information**. This could entail robust public funding for media in the public interest – for

example, expanding public service broadcasters, funding non-profit newsrooms, or creating endowments for investigative journalism. The core idea is that truthful information is a social need, not a luxury for those who can pay.

By treating media as a public good (analogous to a library or a public hospital), we ensure that the incentives shift from maximising clicks or surveillance to maximising **informed citizens**. Indeed, initiatives like *NewsMatch* in the U.S., which match public donations to nonprofit news outlets, demonstrate how collective funding can reduce dependence on clickbait and ‘parasite’ content models. When people are not solely customers but stakeholders in media (through taxes, memberships, or donations), media outlets are freer to pursue truth over virality.

Impact: This approach **reduces the economic incentives for misinformation**, since profiteers who spread fake news for ad revenue find less fertile ground in a system that is less driven by ad clicks.

5.2 Local and Regional Empowerment

The Foundational Economy emphasises *meeting local needs* and empowering local communities. Translated to media, this means **investing in local journalism and community media** as a bulwark against both external manipulation and internal disengagement. In many regions, ‘news deserts’ have emerged where local news has vanished; rebuilding local media (through grants, local ownership models, and training programs) restores a crucial layer of accountability and trust. Community-owned media cooperatives, for example, allow residents to literally own and govern their media, ensuring content reflects local priorities rather than distant corporate interests.

Impact: Empowered local media make communities **more resilient to misinformation and manipulation** because people can verify information through local, trusted sources and are less dependent on faceless algorithms. It also increases civic engagement – residents see their realities and voices represented, enhancing trust in the media as *their* tool, not an outsider’s weapon.

5.3 Equitable Resource Distribution

A foundational media approach calls for **equitable distribution of resources in the information ecosystem**, rather than concentration of revenue in a few platforms. Concretely, this could mean redirecting public subsidies and philanthropic funds *away from* the biggest platforms (which currently dominate digital ad markets) toward independent media and local content producers. It also means enforcing fair economic arrangements: for instance, requiring tech platforms to share revenue with news publishers for the content they index, or investing in open-source alternatives not driven by surveillance advertising.

The economic principle here is to align media funding with societal well-being over maximal profit. As a policy example, some countries have considered taxes on digital ad revenue of giants like Google/Facebook, with proceeds supporting public interest journalism – a redistribution that counters the parasitic flow of funds out of communities.

Impact: By **reducing the power imbalance** where a few large actors dominate, we mitigate the risk of those actors being single points of failure or manipulation (for example, a state-backed disinformation campaign exploiting one platform’s algorithms). A more distributed media economy makes the overall system harder for ‘parasites’ to hijack, and ensures that a greater share of media wealth is reinvested in content creation and community service rather than extracted as monopoly rents.

5.4 Long-Term and Intergenerational Sustainability

A mutualistic, foundational model prioritises **long-term benefits over short-term gains**. In practice, this means favouring business models that sustain media over decades – subscription models, member-owned models, public endowments – instead of those that burn bright and collapse (venture-capital fuelled clickbait farms, for example).

It also means building ‘inhibitory structures’ into media platforms to **deter short-term sensationalism** and reward quality. For example, content moderation and curation policies can be aligned with accuracy and public value, even if that means slower growth, as noted in the Peterson–Harris discussion about introducing friction to viral spread. Intergenerational sustainability in media also involves training and education: equipping the next generation with media literacy and journalistic skills.

When media organisations invest in young reporters, community workshops, and knowledge preservation, they act in a symbiotic way – feeding the host society with enlightenment, and in turn gaining trust and relevance for the future.

Impact: By deprioritising the rapid viral hits and low-quality ‘fast content,’ this approach **discourages parasitical behaviours** (like bots and troll farms that thrive on virality). It nurtures an audience that values and supports substantive content, thereby creating a healthier feedback loop for the media environment that can endure for generations.

5.5 Citizen-Centric Governance and Shared Understanding

In a foundational media system, **governance of media platforms includes the public** as an active participant, not just a passive consumer. This might involve public advisory boards for social media companies, participatory decision-making in community media, or co-operative ownership structures where users/members vote on major issues. The principle, drawn from democratic ideals, is that those affected by media (which is essentially everyone) should have a say in how media operate.

For instance, the European Union’s push for ‘*Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI*’ in content moderation underscores the need for accountability to citizen interests. Similarly, requiring transparency of algorithms and giving users avenues to appeal moderation decisions make the system feel fair and accountable. A citizen-centric approach helps rebuild **social trust** because people no longer see media as an opaque top-down force; instead, media institutions become *ours*, shaped by shared values and open debate.

Moreover, by elevating facts and inclusive dialogue (public interest journalism, diverse voices, fact-checking collaborations), the media can foster **shared understanding** across society. Rather than amplifying division for clicks, a foundational approach seeks common ground information – the verified facts and contextualised narratives that help different groups understand each other.

Impact: With the public’s needs and participation at the centre, media are **less likely to be co-opted by authoritarian or extremist agendas**, since transparency and plural oversight act as antibodies to parasitic manipulation. The result is enhanced trust in information sources and a reversal of epistemic fragmentation: media become a *connector* in society, not a wedge.

In essence, the Foundational Economy model re-envisioned media as a **symbiotic institution** – one that, like a beneficial gut flora in an organism, helps its host (society) digest information properly, gain nourishment (knowledge), and build immunity to toxins (misinformation). This is in stark contrast to the parasitic model, where the media feed on the host and give little back. It's useful to explicitly invoke the biological contrast: *mutualism*.

In ecology, **mutualism** is a symbiotic relationship in which both parties benefit. We can strive for a *mutualistic media culture* where the relationship between media and public is win-win. The public provides support (through attention, funding, participation) and in return gains truthful information, education, and empowerment. Such a mutual media ecosystem would focus on **regenerative practices** – continually replenishing the social capital, knowledge base, and civic engagement of communities. Instead of depleting audience attention and trust, media in a mutualistic model actively work to **restore trust, build capacity, and generate shared value** over time.

6 Decentralisation and Distributionism: Principles for Regenerative Media

Achieving the transformation outlined above will require structural changes. Two key principles that emerge from both the foundational approach and earlier discussions in this project are **decentralisation** and **distributionism** (also known as distributism). These ideas guide how we can practically reorganise media ownership and control to prevent parasitical domination and encourage symbiosis.

6.1 Decentralisation

This principle involves shifting control and decision-making in media away from a few centralised entities and toward many independent, local or community-based units. A decentralised media landscape would feature a rich network of local radio stations, regional news co-ops, independent online forums, and public access channels, rather than content being filtered through a handful of tech giants or media conglomerates.

Decentralisation builds resilience: if one node is compromised by a 'parasite' (say, a platform overtaken by bot traffic or malicious actors), alternative channels remain healthy to serve the public. Moreover, decentralisation fosters **cultural relevance and trust**. When media is locally rooted, it is more likely to reflect the language, concerns, and values of its community, making it inherently more trustworthy and authentic to its audience.

As the *Decentered Media* initiative notes, ‘we all need communication and media that we can trust, that is authentic, and which is relevant to our experience within our communities.’

Centralised media often struggle to meet this test, whereas decentralised community media excel at it by design.

Additionally, decentralising communication technology – for example, using federated social networks or community broadband infrastructure – can reduce dependency on corporate platforms and protect free expression from single-point censorship or outages. Importantly, decentralisation does not mean isolation; decentralised nodes can still share content and collaborate, but under frameworks that ensure **no single actor can enforce an extractive agenda** over all others.

Practitioners advocate that ‘when used conscientiously, decentralised communications and media can be empowering for individuals and communities,’ helping people find their voice and enabling ‘more socially inclusive, diverse and sustainable relationships.’ In short, decentralisation empowers the periphery (ordinary citizens, local groups) and constrains the centre (would-be monopolists or censors), aligning media closer with the public interest.

6.2 Distributionism (Distributism)

Distributionism is an economic philosophy that argues **productive assets should be widely owned rather than concentrated**. Originating from Catholic social thought, distributism presents a ‘third way’ alternative to both *laissez-faire* capitalism and state socialism, which it sees as both tending toward exploitative concentrations of power. In a media context, embracing *distributionism* means promoting **broad ownership and participation in media production**.

This could take many forms: employee-owned media companies, consumer cooperatives that own local newspapers, crowdfunding models that give supporters a stake in content creation, or even distributed content production through open-source journalism networks. The aim is to **democratise the means of media production**. If thousands of small, independent outlets replace a few giant ones, the opportunities for parasitic exploitation diminish – no single entity can as easily siphon value from everyone else.

Furthermore, distributionist media policy would encourage anti-monopoly measures (antitrust laws) to break up or limit the concentration of media power. This is crucial because much of the parasitism in digital media stems from monopoly platforms that can impose unfair terms on users and creators. For example, if a platform like YouTube faces strong competition from cooperatively owned streaming sites, it cannot pay creators fractions of pennies per view without losing them to better alternatives.

Distributionism also aligns with **self-determination and dignity** for media participants – creators and audiences become owners, not serfs in a feudal content economy. Historically, distributist ideas have favoured **small enterprises, family businesses, cooperatives, and mutual organisations** as the backbone of the economy. Translating this to the digital age suggests we should design our media ecosystem to be rich in small-scale content producers and platforms that are interlinked but autonomous.

This could be supported by policies like grants for startup media co-ops, legal frameworks for platform cooperatives, and community investment in media infrastructure. Overall, distributionism provides a philosophical backbone for **decentralising ownership**: it asserts that *neither the state nor a few corporations should control information flows*, but rather that control should be distributed among the people. Such an environment inherently curbs parasitic dynamics because when every community has its own media, a distant entity cannot easily prey on all of them at once.

By implementing decentralisation and distributionist principles, we move toward a **regenerative media system**. In ecology, a regenerative system is one that restores and renews the resources it uses. Likewise, a decentralised, widely owned media system would continuously **reinvest in the social and informational capital of communities**. Instead of wealth and data extracting upward to a centre, value circulates locally. Instead of information being a one-way broadcast from the powerful to the masses, communication becomes a two-way or networked exchange where **feedback and accountability** are built-in.

Crucially, such a system aligns economic incentives with social outcomes: if a town owns its local newspaper cooperative, the ‘profits’ are measured in community awareness and engagement as much as in dollars, and any financial surplus is likely reinvested in better service

(hiring another reporter, upgrading equipment) rather than siphoned to distant shareholders. This mirrors the Foundational Economy's ethos that **meeting society's needs is the primary goal**, with economic returns structured to support that goal rather than undermine it.

It should be acknowledged that decentralisation and distributionism are not about eliminating all large-scale media or all profit; rather, they ensure *checks and balances*. A pluralistic media ecosystem can still include nationwide networks and successful businesses, but these would operate alongside and in balance with myriad community-level and non-profit outlets. The result is a **mixed ecosystem** where **no single logic (whether commercial, state, or partisan)** dominates.

As Foundational Economy thinkers note, a healthy economy has zones with different purposes – similarly, a healthy media system can have a public zone, a private zone, and a community zone coexisting. The foundational perspective is simply that the *foundational zone* – media serving basic democratic and informational needs – must be protected and not overwhelmed by the more predatory zone of purely commercial media.

7 Toward Mutual Media: Sustainability, Trust, and Shared Understanding

Building on the above, this policy position advocates for the media to be reframed as **mutual, symbiotic infrastructure** essential to a functioning society. The end goals of this transformation can be encapsulated in four interrelated outcomes: **intergenerational sustainability, shared understanding, social trust, and regenerative practice**.

7.1 Intergenerational Sustainability

Policies should ensure that the media ecosystem we create today will benefit future generations tomorrow. This means prioritising durability and adaptability in media institutions. For example, establishing public media trusts or endowments can provide funding insulated from short-term market shocks, so that quality journalism persists into the future.

Educational initiatives – such as media literacy in schools and youth media programs – invest in the next generation's capacity to produce and critically consume content. A sustainable media system also respects **planetary limits** (e.g., reducing the massive energy footprint of data centres and streaming) in line with Foundational Economy principles of sustainability. By thinking long-term, we avoid the trap of exploiting resources (audience attention, personal data, etc.) to exhaustion; instead, we **renew** those resources.

A practical example is the promotion of slow news or solutions journalism that maintains public interest over longer cycles, rather than burning out audiences with constant sensational ‘feeds.’ Intergenerational thinking also involves archiving and knowledge preservation – treating media content as a cultural commons to be saved for posterity rather than ephemeral clickbait. This focus counters the disposability of content in the parasitic model and builds continuity and memory in society’s conversations.

7.2 Shared Understanding

One of the media’s highest purposes in a democracy is to cultivate a *shared base of knowledge* – facts and narratives that different groups can reference even when they disagree. The mutual media model intentionally works to rebuild this common ground. Through fact-based reporting, inclusive storytelling, and facilitation of dialogue, media can help diverse audiences understand one another. For instance, public broadcasters often see it as their duty to provide balanced coverage that various social groups deem fair, thus creating a baseline of facts accepted across society. The policy implication is support for those forms of content that bridge divides (public affairs programming, community dialogues, translations for minority-language communities, etc.).

By contrast, extractive media models often thrive on **fragmentation** – segmenting audiences into isolated echo chambers that can be monetised or manipulated separately. A foundational approach resists that: it encourages media projects that deliberately span across communities and foster empathy. *Shared understanding* does not mean perfect agreement or elimination of debate; it means that even in debate, there is recognition of a common reality and mutual respect. This is vital for tackling large collective challenges (public health, climate change) where broad consensus on facts is needed.

A symbiotic media ecosystem aims to deliver what Peterson and Harris worried was failing – the ability of society to converge on truth rather than splinter into irreconcilable viewpoints. In measurable terms, success would be indicated by fewer wildly divergent fact-worlds among the public (for example, reducing the partisan gap on basic science or election results) and increased consumption of media that presents multiple sides civilly.

7.3 Social Trust

Trust is both an input and an output of a healthy media system. Right now, trust in the media is at historic lows in many democracies, partly due to the very parasitic practices discussed. To reverse this, the new model makes **transparency and accountability fundamental**. Measures such as clearly stated editorial standards, corrections policies, transparency in funding sources, and user representation in governance all serve to build trust. When people see how decisions are made and have recourse when mistakes occur, they begin to trust the institution.

Another aspect is **trust between communities**: a plural media landscape ensures representation for various groups (urban and rural, different ethnicities, etc.), which can improve how those groups view each other. For example, a community radio station run by an indigenous group can build trust by giving that community a voice in the public sphere, while also educating others about their perspective – reducing prejudice born of ignorance.

The expected outcome of our proposed framework is a **major boost in trust**: trust of audiences in their media, trust of communities that their stories will be told fairly, and trust of citizens in the information they base decisions on. Indeed, by **‘prioritising public interest and citizen governance,’** a foundational media system *‘fosters informed discourse, countering the epistemic collapse’* and reinforcing democratic legitimacy. Social trust is regenerative: as it builds, the feedback loop means people engage more constructively, which further improves media quality and trustworthiness.

7.4 Regenerative Economic and Media Practices

The term *regenerative* implies processes that restore and renew their sources of energy or materials. In media business models, this translates to practices that **reinvest in content creation, community engagement, and workforce development**, rather than just extracting profits. For example, a regenerative practice for an online platform would be to channel a portion of its revenues directly into funding independent journalism or local content creators (much like cooperatives distribute dividends to members).

Another practice is adopting **circular economy** concepts: repurposing user contributions in a way that benefits users. Wikipedia is a good example – knowledge contributed by users is freely available to benefit other users, rather than being locked behind paywalls or exploited for advertising. Policies encouraging open access and open-source media tools also embody

regeneration: they empower more people to create and share, thus continually refreshing the media landscape with new talent and ideas.

Contrast this with extractive models that burn through trends and creators quickly (the rise-and-fall of viral stars, or the churn of disposable content for ad clicks). Regenerative media also means caring for the *human* aspect – providing fair wages and support for journalists and creators, and ensuring their mental well-being in an industry plagued by burnout. By valuing the people behind media as much as the profits, we avoid the hollowing-out of capacity that has happened under cost-cutting, exploitative regimes. In summary, regenerative practices make the media ecosystem **self-sustaining**: communities support media that supports communities in a virtuous circle. Over time, this should increase the quality and diversity of content, because creators see a future for themselves and audiences see the media contributing positively to their lives.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

Reforming an entrenched parasitical media culture is undoubtedly a complex challenge, but it is a necessary project for democratic resilience and social well-being. The Foundational Economy model and the principles of mutualism, decentralisation, and distributionism provide a compelling blueprint for change. By **treating media as a foundational infrastructure** – as critical to society as water or electricity – we can justify and design substantial public interventions to restructure incentives and ownership. This does not mean stifling innovation or reverting to a pre-digital era; rather, it means *harnessing innovation for public benefit* and ensuring the digital era evolves beyond extraction.

Policy-makers should consider the following steps, drawn from the analysis above, to operationalise this vision:

- **Regulatory Frameworks for Transparency and Accountability:** Enact rules that require media platforms (especially social media and search engines) to **disclose how content is sourced and prioritised**, enforce rigorous transparency in political advertising, and provide users with control and remedies (such as appeals for unfair moderation). Independent oversight bodies or audits can verify these practices. The goal is to eliminate the shadows in which parasitical manipulation thrives and to rebuild user trust through openness.

- **Support for Public and Cooperative Media Ventures:** Establish funding mechanisms like matching grants, tax incentives, or public options that **seed the growth of local news outlets, non-profit journalism, and media co-ops**. Programs akin to *Report for America* (which places journalists in local newsrooms) can be expanded with government or philanthropic support. Encourage large foundations and governments to divert a portion of media budgets to community-owned media, reflecting distributionist ideals. This diversifies content production and places more media in the hands of mission-driven entities rather than profit-maximisers.
- **Antitrust and Anti-Monopoly Enforcement:** Vigorously apply competition law to break up excessive concentrations of media power – for instance, scrutinising mergers that consolidate news organisations or challenging app store duopolies that tax content creators. As one commenter pointed out, real antitrust action (like the ongoing cases against Big Tech) can prevent monopolies from being *‘always extractive and anti-people.’* A more competitive market aligned with distributionism means platforms must treat users and creators better or risk losing them. Additionally, explore **data portability and interoperability mandates** to weaken network effects that lock users into parasitic platforms (allowing users to move their social connections or content easily to alternative services).
- **Decentralised Technology Investment:** Fund and promote **decentralised and open-source media technologies** – for example, decentralised social networking protocols (such as Mastodon or Bluesky’s AT Protocol) that operate without a central corporate owner. Such technologies reduce the risk of any single platform exploiting its entire user base. Government and academic grants could support development of these tools, and public institutions might adopt them for official use to set an example. A decentralised internet structure is more aligned with democratic values of freedom and resilience.
- **Education and Literacy Campaigns:** Alongside systemic changes, empower citizens with the knowledge to navigate the media landscape. **Media and digital literacy** programs in schools, libraries, and community centres can help individuals recognise parasitical content (scams, disinformation, clickbait) and understand how to find and support high-quality sources. When people learn *why* certain content is pushed at them (e.g., how engagement algorithms work) and the importance of credible information,

they become less susceptible to exploitation. Education fosters the ‘immune system’ of the social body, enabling hosts to better resist parasites.

The **expected outcomes** of implementing these recommendations align with what we set out as the goals of a symbiotic media system. We anticipate a *reduction in parasitical manipulation* – transparency and diversified ownership will limit opportunities for bots, trolls, and bad actors to exploit the system. We foresee *enhanced resilience*: with strong local media and equitable resource distribution, communities will have higher trust and be less vulnerable to hostile information attacks. And we aim for *democratic strengthening*: by restoring public interest focus and enabling citizen participation, media can once again become a pillar of democracy rather than a source of division.

In metaphorical terms, if today’s media environment has been likened to a diseased host riddled with parasites, the policies proposed here serve both as a medicine and a long-term wellness regimen. They purge some of the toxicity (through regulation of abuses and breaking of monopolies) and rebuild vitality (through public investment, community empowerment, and education). We move from a vicious cycle to a **virtuous cycle**: trustworthy, community-oriented media outlets earn public support and funding, which enables them to produce better content, which further increases public trust and willingness to sustain them.

Crucially, this is not a utopian wish – elements of this model are already in practice or emerging. From the local journalists cooperative in a mid-size city, to national experiments in public internet infrastructure, to global open-source knowledge projects, we have proof of concept that **mutual, non-extractive media** can work. Our task is to amplify and network these efforts, crafting an ecosystem where they become the norm rather than the exception.

The Foundational Economy perspective reminds us that **some sectors are too important to be left to predatory dynamics**. Just as we would not want our water supply or electricity grid controlled by entities that profit from causing scarcity or harm, we should not accept a media ecosystem governed by parasitical logic.

Instead, by treating media as foundational, we assert that **information, like clean water, is a collective right and necessity**. The policy stance, therefore, is to nurture a media culture of mutualism – one that delivers value *with* and *for* its public, not at the public’s expense.

Embracing decentralisation and distribution of media power will ensure that the media truly serve as a conduit for shared knowledge and progress, rather than a siphon for wealth and influence. This repositioning of media within a Foundational Economy framework is not only a defensive strategy against current problems, but a proactive vision for a media system that actively contributes to democratic life, community regeneration, and the empowerment of future generations.

By implementing these changes, we can move decisively **away from the expectation of extractive media** and toward a new expectation: that media can be a trusted partner in society's growth, a realm of human endeavour guided by shared values and reciprocal benefits. The stakes – truth, trust, and democracy itself – make it imperative that we pursue this transformation with urgency and resolve.

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